

THE
CREDIBILITY
OF
CHRISTIANITY
VINDICATED,

IN ANSWER TO
MR. HUME'S OBJECTIONS;
IN TWO DISCOURSES

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.

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1798.

TO
THE RIGHT REVEREND
GEORGE,
LORD BISHOP OF LINCOLN.

MY LORD,

WHEN Christianity is attacked by the arguments of the philosopher, and the scoffs and ridicule of the weak, it behoveth us "to give a reason of the hope that is in us." A superficial examination of the evidences of Christianity; the vanity of controverting established opinions; or viciousness of life, generally operate as reasons for opposing the truths of the Gospel; but whatever be the motive, it is commonly attended with a total indifference to the great end of religion — a due preparation for a future state. Reflection upon the construction of the universe, and the nice laws by which the material world is governed, is the only thing which can bring a man back from Atheism to the belief of a Supreme Being; and when the mind is satisfied of a Providence, the evidences of the Christian religion will find an easy admission; the defect not lying in the evidence, but in a previous disposition of the

DEDICATION.

the mind to receive it. Little therefore remains, but earnestly to exhort Unbelievers to consider the grounds of our belief, with that attention which the importance of the subject demands. These Discourses are therefore published, not as an attempt to place the evidences of our religion in a new point of view, but principally to state and consider (what I conceive to be) the only true principle upon which Mr. HUME's argument against the credibility of miracles, can be satisfactorily answered. If the reasoning be admitted, the conclusions which are deduced will justify our belief of the Gospel dispensation.

The high situation of your Lordship in the church, your zeal for the interests of religion, and your unremitting attention to the welfare of it's ministers, would have induced me to dedicate these Discourses to your Lordship, had I not been influenced by motives of private obligation.

I am, my Lord,

Your Lordship's very obliged

and most obedient

humble servant,

S. VINCE.

SERMON I.

2 PET. i. 16.

We have not followed cunningly devised fables.

IF the Christian Religion be true, that is, if it be the will of God communicated to man, and intended, from it's first promulgation, to be a law for future ages, it's evidence will undoubtedly rest upon such proofs as are always sufficient to produce conviction to every sincere and impartial enquirer; for otherwise, we must suppose that God requires our belief, without reasonable evidence to command it. Now as we have not a direct proof of it's truth from the evidence of our senses, our conviction must arise from it's *internal* evidence, that is, from the superior excellency of it's doctrines, and the consistency of it's different parts, and from it's *external* proofs, that is, from the authenticity of the testimonies in defence of the facts which are recorded in the New Testament, more particularly of the miracles which are said to have been wrought by the first promulgators of Christianity. In respect to the *former*, as it is not my design here to examine, how far it tends to establish the credibility of the Christian dispensation, I shall only observe, that the New Testament offers an unex-

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ceptionable system of religion and morality ; confessedly more perfect than the wisest of the Heathens ever taught, and perfectly agreeable to what we might expect from the attributes of God, and the relation in which he stands with respect to man. And when we consider, that this was first taught by men so much inferior in all acquirements derived from education to the most celebrated lawgivers of old—when we see men, called from their manual occupations, deliver such excellent discourses on the nature and attributes of God, and all the various duties which we owe to him, to our neighbour, and to ourselves, if we had no further proof of their divine commission, any reasonable and impartial enquirer would, at least, be induced to receive it as the most probable system of true religion, and would rest his hopes upon it, in preference to any other. But the evidence for Christianity does not rest here ; for they who recorded these things assure us, that, for the further conviction of mankind, the promulgators of these doctrines performed many public miracles in confirmation of their being sent from God. The times and places where the miracles were wrought, and the names of the persons who were the subjects of their operations, were recorded, whereby the facts became exposed to the most critical investigation ; and their authenticity might have been immediately confuted, if they had not been true. But many of the first enemies of our religion did not deny that Jesus Christ and his Apostles wrought the miracles which are attributed to them, and therefore they opposed Christianity upon other grounds. If the Christian Religion had been “ the work of man,” the imposition might have been easily exposed, by showing that the miracles, said to have been performed, were not performed ;
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and as the first adversaries, under the circumstances of Christianity being an imposture, could have done this, but did not, they virtually acknowledged their authenticity. A late eminent writer, however, has attacked this evidence in favour of Christianity; and has endeavoured to prove, that the miracles, said to have been wrought in it's defence, cannot be rendered credible; and as an attempt to destroy this evidence, is an attack upon the fundamental support of Christianity, I shall endeavour to show that his arguments are inconclusive.

The substance of his argument is this. "Experience is our only guide in matters of fact. A variable experience gives rise to probability; an uniform experience, to full proof. Probability supposes an opposition of experiments or testimonies, and the force of the superior evidence is their difference. Our belief arises from the observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses. If the fact attested be marvellous, or such as has seldom fallen under our observation, there is a contest of two opposite experiments, and the credibility for one or the other is only their difference. If the fact affirmed be miraculous; if besides, the testimony considered apart amounts to an entire proof, then there is proof against proof, of which the strongest must prevail by their difference. A miracle is a violation of the law of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined, and therefore cannot be destroyed by any proof from testimony. A miracle therefore can never in any degree be rendered credible." This is our author's reasoning. How far it is conclusive, we propose to examine.

Let us first consider, what are all the circumstances which induce us to believe a fact reported to be true, or upon which our determination rests. *For* it's credibility, there will be — the number of witnesses — their degree of credit for veracity — that they had no motives to deceive — that they had abilities to judge of the truth of what they related — that there was a power in the agent to accomplish the act, said to have been performed — that there was a cause sufficient to justify the action — that there are monuments of it which commenced from the time of the fact, and that the other parts of the history with which the fact is connected, are true: *Against* it's credibility (according to our author), the want of experiencing similar facts, and the extraordinary nature of the fact itself. Now in establishing the credibility of a fact, it is manifest, that we must attend to *all* the circumstances by which it is rendered credible, and the contrary, otherwise we can deduce no conclusion upon which we can depend.

What we mean by the laws of nature, are those laws which are deduced from that series of events, which, by divine appointment, follow each other in the *moral* and *physical* world; the *former* of which we shall here have occasion principally to consider, the present question altogether respecting the *moral* government of God — a consideration which our author has entirely neglected, in his estimation of the credibility of miracles. Examining the question therefore upon this principle, it is manifest, that the extraordinary nature of the fact is no ground for disbelief, provided such a fact, in a *moral* point of view, was, from the condition of man, become necessary; for in that case, the Deity, by dispensing his assistance in proportion to our wants, acted upon the same principle as in his more ordinary

dinary operations. For however opposite the *physical* effects may be, if their *moral* tendency be the same, they form a part of the moral law. Now in those actions which are called miracles, the Deity is directed by the same moral principle as in his usual dispensations; and therefore being influenced by the same motive to accomplish the same end, the laws of God's moral government are not violated, such laws being established by the *motives* and the *ends produced*, and not by the *means employed*. To prove therefore the moral laws to be the same in those actions called miraculous, as in common events, it is not the *actions themselves* which are to be considered, but the *principles* by which they were directed, and their *consequences*, for if these be the same, the Deity acts by the same laws. And here, moral analogy will be found to confirm the truth of the miracles recorded in scripture. But as the moral government of God is directed by motives which lie beyond the reach of human investigation, we have no principles by which we can judge concerning the probability of the happening of any new event which respects the moral world; we cannot therefore pronounce any extraordinary event of that nature to be a violation of the moral law of God's dispensations; but we can nevertheless judge of it's agreement with ~~that~~ law, so far as it has fallen under our observation. But our author leaves out the consideration of God's moral government, and reasons simply on the facts which are said to have happened, without any reference to an end; we will therefore examine how far his conclusions are just upon this principle.

He defines miracles to be "a violation of the laws of nature;" he undoubtedly means the *physical* laws, as no part of his reasoning has any reference to them in a *moral* point of view. Now these

these laws must be deduced, either from his own view of events only, or from that, and testimony jointly ; and if testimony be allowed on one part, it ought also to be admitted on the other, granting that there is no impossibility in the fact attested. But the laws by which the Deity governs the universe can, at best, only be inferred from the *whole* series of his dispensations from the beginning of the world ; testimony must therefore necessarily be admitted in establishing these laws. Now our author, in deducing the laws of nature, rejects all well authenticated miraculous events, granted to be possible, and therefore not altogether incredible and to be rejected without examination, and thence establishes a law to prove against their credibility ; but the proof of a position ought to proceed upon principles which are totally independent of any supposition of it's being either true or false. His conclusion therefore is not deduced by just reasoning from acknowledged principles, but it is a necessary consequence of his own arbitrary supposition. " 'Tis a miracle," says he, " that a dead man should come to life, because that has never been observed in any age or country." Now testimony, confirmed by every proof which can tend to establish a true matter of fact, asserts that such an event has happened. But our author argues against the credibility of this, because it is contrary to the laws of nature ; and in establishing these laws, he rejects all such extraordinary facts, although they are authenticated by all the evidence which such facts can possibly admit of ; taking thereby into consideration, events of that kind only which have fallen within the sphere of his own observations, as if the whole series of God's dispensations were necessarily included in the course of a few years. But who shall thus circumscribe the operations of divine power

power and wisdom, and say, "Hitherto shalt thou go, and no further." Before he rejected circumstances of this kind in establishing the laws of nature, he should, at least, have shown, that we have *not all* that evidence for them which we might have had, upon supposition that they were true; he should also have shown, in a moral point of view, that the events were inconsistent with the ordinary operations of Providence; and that there was no end to justify the means. Whereas, on the contrary, there *is all* the evidence for them which a real matter of fact can possibly have; they are perfectly consistent with all the moral dispensations of Providence; and at the same time that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is most unexceptionably attested, we discover a moral intention in the miracle, which very satisfactorily accounts for that exertion of divine power.

As the Deity, at the creation, must necessarily have had the whole plan of his government in view, events which are called miracles, may have been the result of a præ-established arrangement, as well as those which are more common; and to produce that series of events which are præ-ordained, can be no violation of a law. From our ignorance therefore of the plans of Providence, we may be led to call that a law, which is not a law. As the world was made for a moral purpose, physical events must be subservient to that end; the laws of God's moral government must therefore direct all such events, when they have a moral tendency. Events which do not concern the moral government of God, as the returns of day and night, summer and winter, are uninterrupted; these being subject only to the laws of matter and motion, continue their course for the benefit of man, so far only as regards his existence here; and his wants

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of this nature being always the same, the same events are continued without any interruption. But in events of a moral tendency, no physical law of this kind takes place, but they then become subject to a moral law, and therefore are liable to vary according to the laws of God's moral government; and we must judge of the credibility of all such events, by referring them to that end. But our author makes the *physical* improbability of an event which altogether respects a *moral* end, the measure of it's incredibility; a principle which must be totally inadmissible. The assertion therefore of our author, that "Miracles are a violation of the laws of nature," stands unsupported; whilst testimony and analogy tend to establish their credibility, and show their agreement with every principle by which we can judge that the Deity is directed in his moral government of the world.

In respect to the *facts themselves*, considered in a *physical* point of view, we can no more account for the common operations of nature, than for those which are most extraordinary; a tree springing up from a seed which is buried in the earth, is equally unaccountable and astonishing as that of a man being raised from the dead. Now there is nothing in our condition which requires that the latter should happen so often as the former; and accordingly it is found not to happen so often; but taking place only at those times when some such extraordinary manifestation of divine power becomes necessary in order to correct the moral state of the world, it affords a very satisfactory proof that it stands in that regular series of events which Providence is carrying on for the benefit of mankind.

The miracle under our present consideration involves in itself no contradiction, and therefore it contains no impossibility; and being possible, there
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is nothing in the fact which excludes an investigation into it's truth or falsehood; in examining therefore into the grounds upon which the belief of this miracle may rest, we ought to admit the same evidence as would be allowed in any other case. A matter of fact, granted to be possible, and shown to be agreeable to God's dispensations, must be confirmed or overthrown by testimony. We may reason, in many cases, concerning the probability of an event's having happened; and may show, upon true principles, the number of chances for and against it; but reason can do no more; it can never prove whether it has or has not happened; and if a number of credible witnesses agree in asserting that it has happened, and the fact be also attended with circumstances of the strongest nature to confirm it, we are undoubtedly bound to believe it; the reasoning may be true, and the report of the witnesses may be true; the latter tends to establish the truth of the fact, and the former does not contradict it. The extraordinary nature of a fact, upon it's being first stated, diminishes it's credibility, and the mind remains in a state of doubt, until all the circumstances respecting the event have been examined by those tests by which it's truth may be ascertained. That a man should this hour be deprived of life, and the next restored to it, are actions equally possible and easy to be effected by the power of the Deity; one we see every day, and therefore any degree of evidence is sufficient to render it credible; let us then consider, what circumstances are necessary to render the other credible, though not accompanied with the same degree of certainty as the former; for that which is evident every day to the senses, requires only common testimony to make it considered as absolute certainty; whereas the cred-

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dibility of very extraordinary facts at a great length of time after they are said to have happened, can never amount to more than *moral* certainty, which may however approach so near to *absolute*, that a man's action would be directed by it, in the same manner as if it were absolute. To this degree of certainty we will endeavour to raise the credibility of the fact, that a dead man was restored to life.

In order to render an extraordinary fact equally credible as one more common, it is only necessary to show, that there was an end to be accomplished which required an event of so unusual a nature; in which case the credibility is not diminished, granting that there is a power in the agent to produce the effect. This is every day confirmed by experience. If a very extraordinary fact be related, we at first hesitate to believe it; but if an adequate reason for it be assigned, and a power in the agent to accomplish it be acknowledged, it then becomes credible. And this is the principle by which we are to be directed in estimating the probability of the happening of any *matter of fact*; and more especially, when it has reference to a moral end. When therefore we hear of an extraordinary event, and at the same time see a power in the agent to produce it, and a reason which requires it, the argument against it's credibility, from it's extraordinary nature, will no longer operate to the exclusion of testimony. We are therefore to consider, how far this is the case in the present circumstance.

Miracles are said to have been wrought to establish a more perfect system of religion than any which at that time prevailed in the world; that is, to give such a degree of evidence of it's divine origin, as would render it indisputable that it was promulgated by a "Teacher sent from God." We
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are therefore first to enquire, what necessity there was for the establishment of Christianity.

The system of the universe bears ample testimony of the existence of a Being, infinite in *power*, *wisdom* and *goodness*. For what must be the *power* of that Being, who formed and gave motion to the vast bodies which compose it? And if we consider the nice laws by which these bodies are regulated, and the admirable harmony and simplicity of the arrangement, by which the vicissitudes of day and night, summer and winter, are preserved, we cannot less admire the *wisdom* than the power of the same Being. And when we further consider, that these effects are subservient to the use of man, and that the earth is filled with stores for his support, and for the support of the inferior parts of the creation, his *goodness* will be no less conspicuous. It would take up too much time to give, in detail, all the arguments by which these things may be proved; but whoever will examine the structure of the universe, the construction of the animal and vegetable creation, and the wonderful provisions which are made for their subsistence, will see such marks of power, design, wisdom and goodness, as must force him to acknowledge, "this hath God done, for it is marvellous in our eyes." It has indeed been supposed, that the system is imperfect; containing in itself the seeds of it's own dissolution—that the small irregularities (as they were called) which are produced by the mutual actions of the bodies upon each other, will necessarily bring on it's own destruction. But it is the glorious privilege of man, that he can prove the works of his Creator to be perfect. All these supposed anomalies are now shown to be regulated by fixed laws, which, in a certain course of time, bring all things back to the point from which they departed, and

render the system, by it's own powers, capable of preserving itself to all eternity.

Granting therefore the power, wisdom and goodness of a superintending Being, which is so conspicuous in the works of the creation, and to which alone we must have recourse for any satisfactory proofs of the attributes of God, it being "from them," as St. Paul saith, "that the invisible things of God, even his eternal power and godhead are understood," we are next to show the necessity of a revelation at the time when Christianity was promulgated.

The world, at that time, may be considered as composed of Jews and Gentiles; for although the latter might be subdivided into different classes, yet it is not necessary for our present purpose. In respect to the religion of the Gentiles, it may be considered, first, as wanting authority; secondly, as mistaken in the nature of God; thirdly, as defective in it's moral doctrines, and consequently erroneous in it's practice.

First, as wanting authority. At the time of Homer, there was a tradition of the immortality of the soul. Afterwards, Socrates and Plato taught the same doctrine; and they were the first who attempted to prove it by argument. The former followed traditions which afforded but little satisfaction; but the opinions of the latter respecting God and his dispensations are so consonant with the writings of Moses and the prophets, that he probably acquired them by conversing with the Egyptian priests in his travels into Egypt. Tully says that this doctrine was delivered down from all antiquity, but that the ancients gave no reasons by which it could be satisfactorily proved. Seneca, though he sometimes asserts the soul's immortality, yet at other times denies it. If therefore we
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grant, that some of the ancient philosophers had a few obscure notions of a future state from revelation, and others from the light of nature, yet they could not deliver the doctrine with that authority which was necessary for the conviction of mankind; they were neither "Teachers sent from God," nor could they prove their doctrine to be of divine origin. It could not therefore be expected, that it should have any general influence. Accordingly we find, that they complained of the great inefficacy of their moral doctrines upon the minds and conduct of men, who, they asserted, improved more in knowledge than in goodness. The best and wisest of them were not ashamed to confess their sense of the want of a divine revelation. Socrates said, "You may give over all thoughts of amending men's manners, unless God will send some other person to instruct you." And Plato confessed, that "the present evil state of the world can only be corrected by the particular interposition of God."

Secondly, as containing erroneous opinions respecting the nature of God. The Stoics, by their doctrine of fatality, denied the freedom of the divine will; and the laws of unalterable fate destroyed the omnipotence of the Deity. Epicurus excluded God's providence from the world; nor was it allowed by Aristotle, on this side the celestial spheres; and Plutarch contended for two Gods, one infinitely good, and the other infinitely wicked.

Thirdly, as defective in it's moral doctrines, and practice. Zeno, the founder of the Stoics, made the guilt of all sins equal. Aristippus refused to maintain his own children; he made the pleasure of the body to be the chief good; and taught, that a man might commit theft, adultery or sacrilege, when he saw a convenient opportunity, but not otherwise,

otherwise, as they were not sinful when not discovered. Aristotle and Tully were advocates for hatred and revenge; and it was a precept of one of those who were honoured with the title of, The Seven Wise Men of Greece, "Be kind to your friends, but revenge yourselves on your enemies." These instances are sufficient to show, how unable natural religion is to teach men their duty, when such precepts are deduced from the light of nature by the greatest masters of human learning. Many excellent rules of action may undoubtedly be collected from the writings of the Heathen philosophers; but they are mixed with the grossest absurdities, and have no foundation upon such principles as are the only security for a virtuous life — the fear of God, and the expectation of future rewards and punishments.

The religion of the Jews indeed was of divine origin; and although they had much juster ideas of God, and his superintending providence, yet, as God had not thought fit to reveal clearly to them the doctrine of "life and immortality," their notions respecting his promises were extremely defective, inasmuch as they considered them as directed to this life only; for one part of the Jews absolutely denied the resurrection of the body; and the other part seemed to have had very obscure notions of it; for all the ideas they had of a Messiah were, that he would come and set up a temporal kingdom; and they appear to have had no expectations of any benefits but those which respected this life. Of the great mercy of God to man, in giving him an opportunity of securing a future life of endless happiness, they seemed to have been almost as ignorant as the Heathens. And from the severity with which our Saviour reproached the Jews, we may conclude, that the
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moral doctrines which they held were extremely defective. They fell from a true religion into superstition, and trusted all to a multitude of ceremonies and traditions, which were merely of human authority, that at the time when they scrupled not to commit the grossest immoralities, they would sooner have died than have eaten any unclean meats, or dispensed with any of their most trivial ceremonies.

Considering therefore the depraved state of religion at the time when our Saviour appeared, and the benevolence of God to man, as manifest from the works of the creation, it is very credible that he would, under such circumstances, vouchsafe to direct mankind to a more perfect knowledge of his will. Accordingly it is related, that God did send a Person to reform the world, and to promulgate his laws. We are therefore next to consider, on what grounds we are induced to believe this relation.



SERMON II.

2 PET. i. 16.

We have not followed cunningly devised fables.

WE have in our hands a collection of writings called the New Testament, which is said to contain the will of God communicated to man, by a Person called Jesus Christ, above 1700 years ago. That the different parts were written soon after the time of the events which they record, there can be no doubt, as they are expressly acknowledged by a succession of writers up to that time. Profane historians also mention a Person of that name, the founder of a new religion, who at that time lived in Judea. The authors of these writings are said to have been disciples of Jesus Christ, who were most of them with him during his ministry, and related what they saw and heard; and as these circumstances are acknowledged by the enemies as well as the friends of Christianity, it is unnecessary to insist any further upon establishing this point. We have therefore only to consider the evidence for the truth of the facts contained in these writings.

The miracles related to have been performed by Jesus Christ, are said to have been done publicly
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in Jerusalem, and in the principal cities of Judea. The names of the persons on whom he exercised his miraculous powers are mentioned, and also the places where they lived, with many other particulars. The publication of a narrative, containing such extraordinary facts, and so circumstantially related;—of such importance to mankind to be established, if true, and no less important to be contradicted, if false,—would necessarily excite a very strict enquiry respecting them. The effects produced by that enquiry we must therefore next consider, in order to get the evidence upon which the truth of Christianity is founded; that is, we must enquire, how far the evidence tended to the conviction of mankind.

The Acts of the Apostles give an account of the rise and progress of Christianity—that it spread itself quickly into the principal cities of Asia, Greece and Italy, and soon overspread the whole Roman empire. And the Epistles to the different churches which were established in the time of the Apostles, show how much it was, in those early times, dispersed and received as the undoubted word of God. But that the truth of this may not rest on the authority of that book whose authenticity we want to prove, we can produce sufficient proof from profane authors, many of whom were no friends to Christianity. Suetonius represents the Christians to have been very numerous at Rome, about seven years after our Lord's death. Arian, about 25 years after, speaks of baptized and elect persons whom he calls Jews, who, from these circumstances, were undoubtedly Christians; and he tells us, that they were so steady in their principles, that if a man's practice did not agree with his professions, he was called a dissembler. Tacitus, who wrote about 30 years after Christ, tells us, that Christ was the

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founder of the Christian religion—that he lived in Judea in the reign of Tiberius—that he had many disciples, and that he was put to death by Pontius Pilate. Pliny's letter to Trajan, about 60 years after Christ's ascension, proves how much Christianity had then spread; and it also shows, that the severity with which the Christians were treated, did not hinder the spreading of their religion. Quadratus, a famous philosopher at Athens, about 90 years after our Saviour, speaking of the miracles wrought by him, says, "But his works were always seen because they were true; they were seen in those who were raised from the dead. Nay, those persons who were thus healed and raised, were seen, not only at the time of their being healed and raised, but long afterwards, even in the time of *our* days." About the same time, Aristides, an Athenian philosopher, and famed for his acquirements in learning, wrote an apology for the Christians to the emperor Adrian. This apology was extant in the year 870. About the year 140, Antoninus Pius sent his rescript in favour of the Christians, to Larissa, Thessalonica, Athens, and in general throughout all Greece; from which it is manifest, that these places were at that time filled with Christians. Not however to enter into a longer detail, it is evident from the persecutions of the Christians under the different emperors till the time of Constantine, that Christianity, from it's first promulgation, spread very rapidly into all the parts of the earth which were then known, and was embraced by men of the first eminence for virtue and learning.

The rapid conversion of the world to Christianity being established, we are next to consider the motives which could induce mankind thus readily to embrace this religion. These must have been, either

either the injunctions of the civil power under which they lived, and which they dare not disobey — The love of novelty — The hopes of gain, or a conviction of the truth of that religion.

In respect to the first of these, it is granted that the civil power was never exerted to promote the spreading of Christianity; but, on the contrary, it was every where employed to oppose it. It is unnecessary to urge any particular proof of this; both the sacred and profane historians agree in confirming it.

In regard to the second motive, it must be granted that *some* men may always be found who are ready to act upon such principles; but experience shows, that the *generality* of mankind are very tenacious of those principles and prejudices which they imbibed in their infancy, and strongly disposed to defend any opinions which they have long maintained. Under these influences, the most powerful which can operate, the principle here assumed can never be considered as adequate to induce the bulk of mankind to renounce at once those religious tenets which they have embraced from their childhood. It argues a more than ordinary evidence and power in that religion, which can overturn every principle of education, and every superstition and prejudice which can enslave the mind.

In the third place, the followers of Jesus Christ could have no reasonable hopes of gain; for where the established religion of a country is supported by the civil power, and where the prejudices of education will always co-operate to support it, there can be no well founded hope of advantage from opposing it. The first promulgators of Christianity were clearly men of too much good sense not to foresee this; and the experience of

every day must have convinced them of the absurdity of such a supposition. Their persecutions must have shown them, that their temporal interests could not be promoted by it; and it cannot be supposed, that they who embraced this religion could be influenced by any worldly views, when their teachers were obliged to submit to imprisonments and death. Most of the apostles, and many of the first teachers of Christianity, suffered persecutions, with the loss of every thing temporal; and rather than renounce their master, many of them patiently submitted to cruelties which human nature, unassisted by divine assurance of future rewards, could not have supported; and at last, they offered up their lives in defence of their principles; there could therefore be no prospects on this side the grave, to induce their followers to persevere. Indeed, their enemies never accused them of acting upon such principles. It is granted, that no worldly views were ever offered by the first preachers of the Christian religion, in order to induce men to become their disciples; on the contrary, the duties which they required them to fulfil, militated strongly against their interests and their passions. The rewards of a future life were all they had to offer.

The rapid establishment of Christianity must therefore have been from the conviction which those who embraced it, had of it's "Truth and power unto salvation." Christianity at first spread itself amongst the most enlightened nations of the earth—in those places where human learning was in it's greatest perfection; and, by the force of the evidence which attended it, amongst such men it gained an establishment. It has been justly observed, that "it happened very providentially to the honour of the Christian religion, that it did not
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take it's rise in the dark illiterate ages of the world, but at a time when arts and sciences were at their height, and when there were men who made it the business of their lives to search after truth, and sift the several opinions of philosophers and wise men, concerning the duty, the end, and chief happiness of reasonable creatures." Both the learned and the ignorant alike embraced it's doctrines; the learned were not likely to be deceived in the proofs which were offered; and the same cause undoubtedly operated to produce the effect upon each. But an immediate conversion of the bulk of mankind, can arise only from some proofs of a divine authority offering themselves immediately to the senses; the preaching of any new doctrine, if left to operate only by it's own force, would go but a very little way towards the immediate conversion of the ignorant, who have no principle of action but what arises from habit, and whose powers of reasoning are insufficient to correct their errors. When Mahomet was required by his followers to work a miracle for their conviction, he always declined it; he was too cautious to trust to an experiment, the success of which was scarcely within the bounds of probability; he amused his followers with pretended visions, which, with the aid afterwards of the civil and military power, were sufficient to enforce, at least an outward compliance. But the apostles established their religion in opposition to that power; and as the accomplishment of that event was by a few obscure persons, who founded their pretensions upon authority from heaven, we are next to consider, what kind of proofs of their divine commission they offered to the world; and whether they themselves could have been deceived, or mankind could have been deluded by them.

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The miracles, said to have been wrought for the establishment of Christianity, were, giving speech to the dumb, making the lame to walk, restoring sight to the blind, and raising the dead. These are related as public acts; and being matters of fact, the witnesses could not have been deceived in them. Our Saviour and his apostles either did, or did not, these things; if they did not, their endeavour to persuade mankind to believe them, or to credit a circumstantial relation of facts which were not true, must have been a degree of folly and weakness to which their acknowledged good understandings could not have exposed them, and which must at once have discovered them to have been impostors. The belief of facts of an extraordinary nature is very slow, nor can it be confirmed till after mature examination. The report of a dead man being restored to life must necessarily have provoked an examination, which would have discovered the deceit, if the thing had been false; and it must have established the character of him who was the subject of the operation, as “a Teacher sent from God,” if it was found to be true. The names of the persons on whom the miracles are said to have been wrought, and all the circumstances attending the transactions, are so minutely described, that it was very easy to ascertain the truth, even at a considerable time after the event. The discourses of the founder and first promulgators of our religion show them to have been persons of very extraordinary sense and prudence, who had clearly too much wisdom to have been so circumstantial in their account, if they had known them to have been false. The miracles were many of them done in the most public places — at Jerusalem, and at Capernaum, the next principal place in Judea. The ministry of our Saviour continued

tinued for three or four years, during which time, he embraced every opportunity of exerting his miraculous powers; they were not shown once only, and "in a corner," but they were *frequently* and *openly* displayed; and from the commencement of the ministry of the apostles to the death of St. John, there was a period of about 60 years, during which time, miracles are acknowledged to have been performed; and in most of the instances in which this divine power was exerted, every thing respecting them was so particularly stated, that mankind had every means of convincing themselves of the truth of the relation; and under these circumstances Christianity was established. A conversion therefore to the Christian religion must have arisen from a full conviction of it's truth. Christianity did not give rise to the report of miracles, but it was founded upon them. There is some doubt in respect to the time when St. John wrote his Gospel; but the other Gospels, and most, if not all the Epistles, were published before the destruction of Jerusalem; for besides that the Jewish state is spoken of as then subsisting, there is a variety of other circumstances which tend to confirm this opinion. Porphyry, the most learned and severe adversary of Christianity, and who possessed every advantage to have discovered whether these writings were spurious, has expressed no doubts of their being genuine. That the evangelists and apostles should publish such a circumstantial relation of facts, so near to the time at which they are said to have happened, if they were not true, is altogether incredible, and totally contrary to every principle upon which a deceiver would act; and to admit them to be false, is to take away the cause and leave the effect. The attempt would have been too gross to have imposed upon

upon mankind, and would have furnished the enemies of Christianity with powers sufficient for its destruction. The apostles attested miracles, done in the very place where they gave their evidence; Peter and John preached the resurrection of Christ, at Jerusalem, not many months after the event. This would not have been the conduct of impostors. I might here also urge the acknowledged simplicity and purity of the lives of the first preachers of Christianity, their benevolence to man, and unaffected piety to God, as strongly co-operating to free them from any suspicion of being deceivers. The testimony of men of strict religious and moral character, of unblameable lives and tried integrity of conduct, to what they themselves have seen, and in which they could not be deceived, must be considered as moral certainty. Under these circumstances, the extraordinary nature of the fact, so far from being an argument *against* its credibility, is an argument *for* it; it being much less probable that such men should deceive in a matter in which the salvation of mankind is concerned, than that they should fall into less errors. Now the apostles are acknowledged to have been men of this description—that they spent their lives in piety to God—in charity to man—in teaching the most perfect morality, and the purest religion—in showing their sincerity by their practice, and dying in defence of their principles. Of such men, we may believe the common failings incident to human nature; but we cannot believe that they would solemnly appeal to God for the truth of what they knew to be false. There was nothing in their character which could beget mistrust. Many of the first adversaries of our religion, and those the most formidable, never disputed the truth of miracles; on the contrary, they
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mention them as having been performed. The Jews themselves acknowledged their reality; and Julian and Celsus, two avowed enemies of Christianity, amongst all the arts which they used to destroy it's credibility, not daring to deny that our Saviour and his apostles wrought miracles, ascribed them to magic. Facts confessed by those who had the greatest interest in denying them, ought to be admitted. But Christianity is now so far lost in philosophy, that our modern infidels dare to oppose, what the first unbelievers, with all the means of information, found themselves obliged to grant. Christianity must therefore have been first received from a full conviction of the truth of the miracles said to have been wrought; it did not owe it's establishment to the persuasions of philosophers and orators, or to the influence of the civil or military power, but *altogether* to the force of it's own evidence. When men are left to judge and act for themselves in a matter in which their eternal happiness is immediately concerned; and where they have no other motive to embrace any new doctrines but the force of their evidence, we may conclude that men will act from conviction; and it was under these circumstances that Christianity was embraced. The evidence which we here offer as grounds of belief of the Christian religion loses none of it's force from length of time, as we reason upon a matter of fact which has never been disputed. The very extraordinary manner in which the world was converted to Christianity, stands an everlasting monument of it's truth; and seems intended by Providence as an argument to future generations of it's divine authority. Christianity was preached, and immediately upon it's first promulgation received by a great number of all ranks of mankind, in all nations. The conclusions

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therefore which are deduced from this circumstance, are as good now as they would have been 1700 years ago. If then we are, as our author asserts, to take experience for our guide, it tends directly to prove our position; for our own uniform experience of the motives by which men are generally influenced to act, proves that Christianity could not have been established in the manner in which it was, if the whole had been an imposition. Hence, the general principles of human action prove the moral certainty of our religion. Our author therefore reasons upon this false principle, that we want experience to convince us of the truth of miracles. We want not experience to convince us, that Christianity must have been first embraced from conviction, and that conviction is immediately connected with the truth of miracles, without which, no sufficient motives for belief can be assigned. A very eminent writer has observed, that "the conversion of the Gentile world, whether we consider the difficulties attending it, the opposition made to it, the wonderful work wrought to accomplish it, or the happy effects and consequences of it, may be considered as a more illustrious evidence of God's power, than even our Saviour's miracles of casting out devils, healing the sick, and raising the dead." Indeed, a miracle said to have been wrought without any attending circumstances to justify such an exertion of divine power, could not easily be rendered credible; and our author's argument proves no more. If it were related, that about 1700 years ago, a man was raised from the dead, without it's answering any other end than that of restoring him to life, I confess that no degree of evidence could induce me to believe it; but if the moral government of God appeared in that event, and there were circumstances

stances attending it which could not be accounted for by any human means, the fact then becomes credible. When two extraordinary events are thus connected, the proof of one establishes the truth of the other. Our author has reasoned upon the fact as standing alone, in which case it would not be easy to disprove some of his reasoning; but the fact should be considered in a moral view—as connected with the establishment of a pure religion, and it then becomes credible. In the proof of any circumstance, we must consider every principle which tends to establish it; whereas our author, by considering the case of a man said to have been raised from the dead, simply in a *physical* point of view, without any reference to a *moral* end, endeavours to show that it cannot be rendered credible; and, from such principles, we may admit his conclusions without affecting the credibility of Christianity. The general principle on which he establishes his argument, is not the great foundation upon which the evidence of Christianity rests. He says, “No testimony can be sufficient to establish a miracle, unless it be of such a kind, that the falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to prove.” Now this reasoning, at furthest, can only be admitted in those cases where the fact has nothing but testimony to establish it. But the proofs of Christianity do not rest simply upon the testimony of its first promulgators, and that of those who were afterwards the instruments of communicating it; but they rest principally upon the acknowledged and very extraordinary effects which were produced by the preaching of a few unlearned, obscure persons, who taught “Christ crucified;” and it is upon these indisputable matters of fact which we reason; and when

the effects are totally unaccountable upon any principle which we can collect from the operation of human means, we must either admit miracles, or admit an effect without an adequate cause. Also, when the proof of any position depends upon arguments drawn from various sources, all concurring to establish it's truth, to select some one circumstance, and attempt to show that that alone is not sufficient to render the fact credible, and thence infer that it is not true, is a conclusion not to be admitted. But it is thus that our author has endeavoured to destroy the credibility of Christianity, the evidences of which depend upon a great variety of circumstances and facts which are indisputably true, all co-operating to confirm it's truth; but an examination of these falls not within the plan here proposed. He rests all his argument upon the extraordinary nature of the fact, considered alone by itself; for a common fact, with the same evidence, would immediately be admitted. I have endeavoured to show, that the extraordinary nature of the fact is no ground for disbelieving it, for two reasons: First, that the circumstances to be accomplished required a fact of that extraordinary nature, as much as the most common events are necessary to fulfil the usual dispensations of Providence, and therefore the Deity was then directed by the same motive as in a more ordinary case, that of affording us such assistance as our moral condition renders necessary. In the establishment of a pure religion, the proof of it's divine origin may require some very extraordinary circumstances which may never afterwards be requisite, and accordingly we find that they have not happened. Here is therefore a perfect consistency in the operations of the Deity, in his moral government, and not a violation

lation of the laws of nature: Secondly, the fact is immediately connected with others which are indisputably true, and which, without the supposition of the truth of that fact, would be, at least, equally miraculous. Thus I conceive the reasoning of our author to be totally inconclusive; and the arguments which have been employed to prove the fallacy of his conclusions, appear, at the same time, fully to justify our belief in, and prove the moral certainty of our holy religion.



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